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The Soviet Union's escalating pressure on Lithuania is being widely described as a series of chess moves, but it looks increasingly like a one-sided game of chicken. Assurances that military force will not be used continue to pour forth from Moscow. Now, however, these assurances are accompanied by a chilling caveat. "President Gorbachev indicated to me," Senator Edward Kennedy said after a meeting in the Kremlin, "that the position of the Soviet government was that there would be no use of force unless lives were threatened." That's a loophole tanks have been driven through before.

In fact, Soviet paratroopers have already smashed into a Lithuanian hospital to beat and seize Lithuanian army deserters who had sought refuge there. Soviet soldiers have seized the headquarters of the Lithuanian Communist Party, leaving its pro-independence, break-away leaders in a state of what one of them called "depression." And Soviet military installations have been directed to impound the hunting rifles and shotguns of Lithuanian citizens. So force is already being "used," though no one is getting killed. Not yet.

Lithuania's gentle pianist-president, Vytautas Landsbergis, is angry—and not just at Mikhail Gorbachev. "The U.S. sold us out," he said. "We know who we are dealing with, but the West does not." And he invoked the memory of 1939, when the Molotov-Ribbentrop pact awarded his country to Stalin and the West did nothing: "All we can do is raise the question to democracies of the West: Are they willing once again to sell out Lithuania?"

The answers coming out of Washington have not been reassuring. As Landsbergis spoke, Bush administration spokesmen were busy "softening" their stance. The administration has displayed annoyance with the Lithuanians for being impolitic, as have some members of Gorbachev's radical democratic opposition in Moscow, who worry that they themselves might get caught in a hard-line backlash. But politic or impolitic, the Lithuanians are, to put it mildly, within their rights.

If indeed there is a struggle in the Kremlin between those who want to crush Lithuania and those who want to let it go, then Washington (and the Western countries generally) had better exert itself to ensure that the crushers do not prevail. The post-Tiananmen Square approach—say tut-tut and then rapidly scuttle back to

business as usual—won't do if there is a bloodbath in Lithuania. Western public opinion won't permit it. Matters, admittedly, are at a delicate stage. But "softening" in the name of what Landsbergis bitterly calls "larger interests" is the wrong message. Bush would do better to make it clear to both sides in the Kremlin that, like it or not, the cold war armistice is very much at stake in Vilnius.